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Swiss Folklore..

Masks from the past



Grotesque masks, sheepskin and stick: the uniform of a *Lötschen Valley "Tschägättä"*

Switzerland's Lötschen Valley is haunted from early February to Ash Wednesday by a peculiar form of eerily-masked beast. The scary figures that stalk the valley's villages seem like a spooky revival of some long-lost heathen rite.

Almost completely cut off from the rest of the world, in the heart of the main alpine chain, lies the Lötschen Valley. The valley can be reached from Kandersteg through the Lötschberg rail tunnel or up a winding road from the adjacent Rhone valley.

In this small and isolated world, the tradition of "driving out the winter" which is celebrated with ancient customs in many alpine countries, has adopted an eerie beauty over the years. The creepy characters who stalk the streets in rags and skins remain totally anonymous throughout, their faces hidden behind grotesque wooden masks.

The "Tschägättä" as they are called, turn up completely unexpectedly in some sleepy snow-covered village and make a dreadful din by striking the wooden sticks they carry against the cowbells they are wearing on a belt around their bodies. Yet this spooky custom is not intended to scare the local population to death. Rather, it is designed to release the unruly side of our souls, the side we usually take pains to conceal.

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According to tradition the small farming communities in the Lötschen Valley have always lived under tough and rigid rule. Even the local church is said to have exercised a strict regime over the population for hundreds of years.

The "Tschägättä" make their mischief between Candlemass-Day (February 2) and Ash-Wednesday. The figures are traditionally out and about between noon and the ringing of the evening church bells around seven o'clock.

There are notes of earlier Tschägättä activities in the Kippel village archives dating back to the mid-19th century.

- Most historians agree that the custom is far older. But it is difficult to say exactly how it arose. There are three main theories. The first is that the Tschägättä grew out of a popular local uprising in 1550, when the rebels disguised themselves to avoid being recognised. The second theory ascribes the Tschägättä to the many heathen customs designed to "chase out the winter" which have been passed down through the ages. The third theory sees the origins of the Tschägättä in a 15th-century band of thieves from the southern side of the valley who disguised themselves in masks before plundering the other local villages.

Whatever their origins, the Tschägättä add a dash of scary contemporary colour to this remote alpine valley.



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